

The General Sumter Memorial Academy at Stateburg was first located in this old mansion at Stateburg. It was known as "Acton."

## A Champion of His State

Col. John J. Dargan, educational pioneer, left his mark also as a lawyer, lecturer, public official, historian and peace advocate

By Bill Winter

SOME 110 years ago there appeared on the South Carolina scene a man destined for a most unusual and diverse career.

Born October 10, 1848, to Dr. Edwin and Sarah Thomas Dugan, John J. Dargan was a son who shortly thereafter became John J. Dargan. He was barely old enough to enter service in the Confederate Army before that tragic conflict came to a close.

Six months in the service of his beloved Southland was merely the first phase of a career that was to include many phases—student, lawyer, public official,

He was born at Ebenezer, a small community near Darlington. His adult life was spent, for the most part, in Darlington and Sumter counties. He chose to be buried in Sumter County at historic Stateburg.

This was natural, for it was at Stateburg that he dedicated his greatest efforts toward tailoring education to fit the needs of a community and its people.

That, however, was after he had ended some other interesting phases of his career.

Presumably, after his war service, the young man returned

campaign for solicitor of the Sumter district, his efforts, along with the work of thousands of others, were successful in placing Gen. Hampton in the governor's chair. This ended, as most every South Carolinian knows, the ordeal of Reconstruction in the Southland.

Clifton Moise, who prepared a paper for the Stateburg Literary and Music Society, says that although the Colonel was "Essentially a man of religion and peace, he knew how to act when duty called or necessity demanded."

From his later career, it seems clear that Col. Dargan was never completely happy in any enterprise other than teaching, and it was as a teacher and school administrator that he gained most recognition.

In fact, his work at the General Sumter Memorial Academy at Stateburg brought commendatory letters from top Washington officials—including President Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1883, Colonel Dargan vigorously strove to have South Carolina take a firm position on free trade, and he made numerous speeches on the subject. At a Chicago convention the following year he was asked to present a resolution.

His resolution—he was the only delegate from a state south of the Potomac—declared that "Free trade is an essential member of the family of free institutions, as indispensably connected with the family as free thought, free speech, free press, or free choice of modes of worship."

It drew high praise from many sections of the country, and later speeches at Chicago and New York led to his being chosen as editorial manager of the Daily Statesman in Austin, Texas.

The biggest drawback to the job was that it took Colonel Dargan away from his beloved native state, and in six months he was back.

"I had my best success there but could not be happy outside of S. C. and came back after six months of service," he wrote in 1913. "I am happier now at Stateburg than I have ever been in my life before."

In the early '90s Col. Dargan entered another phase of his varied career, this time as the editor of a paper in Sumter, The Freeman. One of his crusades at this time was woman suffrage and equal rights for women. He offered a column of his newspaper for advertisements free to any merchant who would employ a woman clerk.

His advocacy of woman suffrage was not altogether new—in 1887 in a speech before the Stateburg Literary Club, he called for "full and unqualified enfranchisement of women."

As Moise notes, "As the father of ten talented and charming daughters there is little wonder that he should have gone 'all out' for women's rights."

Regarding the Colonel's interest in South Carolina history and men of note, Moise says: "The Colonel was doubtless the most interested and best informed man in the history of his state

in his day. Certainly he has had no equal in his determination for the recognition of the State's great men and for the merits and accomplishments of the state itself. It at times his voice sounded slightly partisan or controversial, it was because of his overweening love and patriotism for his state and section. This love of history led him to organize the Pee Dee Historical Society of which he was made Secretary. The first fruit of this group was the republication of Gregg's H.O.C. (History of the Old Cherokees) with addenda, bringing the history down to modern times, the work of Col. Dargan. The excellent history had long been out of print and was in great demand. Such works are enduring monuments.

"Through his lectures and writings Col. Dargan influenced the legislature to place in its

hall the portrait of John Laurens, bringing to that great man an appreciation, though justly deserved, never before accorded. With even more fire and tenacity he pleaded for John C. Calhoun, offering the resolution: 'that Robert E. Lee is the greatest American Soldier and Calhoun the greatest American Statesman . . . inseparable names in the study of American history—unequaled in genius and loftiness of purpose and both without a moral stain . . .'

Another project of the Colonel's along this line was his efforts to arouse interest in 1905-06 in securing money for a monument to the memory of General Thomas Sumter. He was appointed chairman of the commission to undertake the work of erecting the memorial.

Col. Dargan was honored by Theodore Roosevelt by the sending of the entire garrison of Fort Moultrie and the Artillery Band to the scene of the unveiling. Thousands of South Carolinians joined in the festivities in August of 1907.

His intense interest in history also led the Colonel into announcing that he would write three books on South Carolina history—a subject about which he frequently lectured. He completed a "School History of South Carolina," which was published in 1906 and adopted for sixth grade use in the state.

Some of his lecturing was in the summer schools—high schools and colleges—but more of it was speaking to groups wherever he chose to go. Frequently his daughters presented a musical program, for which admission was charged, and then the Colonel would speak out on the need to honor South Carolina's great men.

Typical of his tireless efforts to see that South Carolinians received credit for their work were his efforts on behalf of Dr. John Leighton Wilson, a Presbyterian missionary.

A Frenchman, Dr. Chaillu, had received credit for having discovered the gorilla. Col. Dargan collected evidence to show Dr. Wilson, a South Carolinian, had really reported existence of the beast at an earlier date than Chaillu, and convinced the Boston Natural History Society that he was right.

His interest in peace was evidenced several years before the movement gained much popular recognition—it had been a lifetime ideal. Regarding his efforts in this field, he later wrote: "My little private school at Darlington was the first school in the world, as far as can be ascertained, to connect school work with the Universal Peace Movement, holding a meeting on the day and at the hour of meeting of the Peace Conference at the Hague in Holland."

A few years later, in 1905, he was selected by the State Teacher's Association to represent

them at the International Peace Conference held in Boston, and he was the only delegate present from the South. In 1907 he collected expositions from leading South Carolinians and published a pamphlet called "Expressions from South Carolina on Universal Peace." It was distributed to all the schools of the state.

Col. Dargan apparently once seriously considered running for the Senate, and in 1908 his visit at the White House, where he talked at length with President Roosevelt, caused some speculation. However, the newspaper account of the visit says the President and his visitor discussed education in general and the General Sumter Memorial Academy in particular.

Later in the year Col. Dargan realized a great ambition as a result of his talks with the President and Seaman A. Knapp, a top Department of Agriculture officer. In August, the Sumter Academy became the first high school in the United States to have a demonstration farm connected with it.

Mr. Moise says the project came about this way: "These activities (in peace, history, and education) along with his high intelligence, his knowledge of history and his faith in the principles of his party led his friends to urge him to run for the U. S. Senate. But he had now become absorbed in the need of his section and the state for improvement of rural schools, and a few months after the announcement of his candidacy, he turned his face to his chosen task. It is scarcely necessary to review to this group the condition of the rural school at the turn of the century. Sufficient to say that most were one-teacher, a few two-teacher schools, in some of them one woman taught 50 pupils classified from first grade to those preparing for college, schools so miserably equipped that effective work was next to impossible.

"After making a study of the best schools in other parts of the country, Col. Dargan called a meeting of the patrons of Stateburg District comprising districts 8, 9, 10 and 11 at the High Hills Baptist Church, original home of Furman University, to which he invited the state and county superintendents of education and Prof. L. T. Baker and W. H. Hand of the University of South Carolina, all of whom made speeches supporting the plan for consolidation advanced by Col. Dargan.

"As a result, the General Sumter Memorial Academy representing the above mentioned districts opened its doors October 10, 1905, with Col. Dargan as superintendent and four assisting teachers, in Acton, the old home of Gen. Sumter. This was, according to the State Department of Education, the first consolidated rural school in

South Carolina.

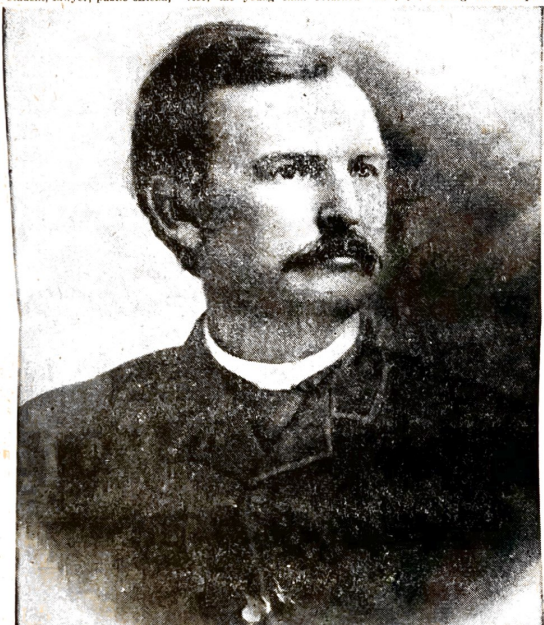
"There is no better evidence of Col. Dargan's executive ability and of his unselfish dedication to the interest of his people than the agricultural demonstration farm which he established in connection with his school. He first persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt, then Dr. Seaman A. Knapp of the U. S. Department of Agriculture of the need to improve farming in this section, and with the endorsement of the University of South Carolina, the United States Government furnished twenty acres of land with stock, seed and fertilizers, to start the first demonstration farming connection with a high school in the United States. Mr. R. M. Canby was selected as first demonstration agent, Mr. Luther Watson, second, then Mr. Frank Williams, who later served Sumter County as Farm Demonstration Agent, and who still (in 1952—the date the Moise address was given) lives at Stateburg, was selected.

"Acton was burned in March, 1911. A new school was built near the site of Acton and the high standard and noble ideals were continued until it was consolidated with the schools of Hagood, Rembert and Dalzell and the two schools of Stateburg township into the excellent rural school of adequate faculty and equipment, Hillcrest. Modern and progressive, it stands as the realization of the dream in the heart of John Julius Dargan.

"Not only did he love teaching best of all the work of his long and varied career, but considered it his most significant contribution. There was no higher calling in his mind, indeed it was the ministry. Beginning to teach in Darlington in 1870, after interruptions of law practice, editing, writing and lecturing, he returned again and again to his favorite profession, until he had forty years to his credit in moulding the life and character of the younger generation of his state.

"He labored unceasingly to imbue his students with high ideals and honorable ambitions, for in them he envisioned the happiness of individual living, and the security of the state. It is a great debt that South Carolina owes to Col. Dargan for the progress made in the liberality of education, in better teaching, in longer school terms, in better curricula, and in better physical equipment.

Col. Dargan died March 8, 1925. He was buried near the site of the school he had loved so well. He was laid to rest in the cemetery of the Church of the Holy Cross. In the same cemetery lies Joel Roberts Poinsett, and not too far away lies General Sumter—two of the South Carolinians for whom Col. Dargan so ardently sought proper recognition.



Colonel John J. Dargan was a man of many careers, but his greatest love was teaching. He picked rural school work because that was where "the need was sorest." He was a soldier, historian, public official, editor, advocate of world peace and woman suffrage, and lecturer.

Lecturer, historian, pioneer in rural education, advocate of peace, free trade, etc. Somehow the unusual Col. Dargan managed to make all facets of his career compatible with his overriding objective—gaining proper recognition for his native state.

He wanted, more than anything else, to see the men who led the various national and sectional movements in his Palmetto State to receive the national recognition they so richly deserved.

On many counts he succeeded, but ironically, never sought recognition for himself. South Carolinians today probably do not know the extent of the debt they owe the ever active Colonel.

to his home to prepare for more formal education. For in 1908, John Dargan entered Furman University as a junior by virtue of the extent of his preparatory work.

Upon finishing Furman, he immediately began teaching school in the beloved native section of his state. A man of boundless energy, he added to his teaching chores the study of law, and gained admittance to the Bar in 1874.

His interest in politics in 1876 was two-fold. He was running for office himself, and he spared no effort in helping General Wade Hampton and his Red Shirts to rid the state of the Reconstructionists.

Though unsuccessful in his own

Campaign he led the fight as chairman for the overthrow of Radical Rule, and in recognition of his devoted and fearless service was made a full Colonel on Hampton's staff, which title he proudly bore until his death. Later he served as captain of a little group of red shirts among whom were W. J. Green, W. J. Villeneuve, C. H. Moise, Jr., C. M. Hurst, Jr., Jas. B. Hurst, F. M. Aiken, Tom P. Mikell, Joseph Wilder, and Walter I. Moses, all of whom were under twenty-one years of age.

Two years after his defeat for solicitor, Col. Dargan led the ticket in Sumter County as a candidate for the State Legislature. In 1880, he again ran for solicitor, was elected and



Dr. Seaman A. Knapp, a high United States Department of Agriculture official, came to the General Sumter Memorial Academy, Stateburg, to dedicate the first agricultural experimental farm in America connected with a High School in 1906. Colonel Dargan was the man who persuaded the government to go along with the proposal to establish the program at Stateburg.